

Mental illness program closing

End of community transition program frustrates families.

BY JOANNE YOUNG
Lincoln Journal Star

Julia Geier found out this week that a Lincoln Regional Center program that has been highly successful for her son is closing.

"It's just devastating," she said Tuesday. "He's finally stabilized."

Lisa Taber, formerly of Lincoln and now living in the Washington, D.C., area, is equally distressed about the fate of the program and its potential effect on her sister. She put up a Web site — www.lrcpsychrehab.org — to try to stop the closure.

The Community Transition Program serves severely mentally ill people, most with some type of schizophrenia, who have in the past had a high number of hospitalizations and a significant history of aggressive or abusive behaviors. Many have had substance abuse issues.

It's an exemplary program, Taber said, and there is evidence other states that closed similar programs have had negative results.

The program's goal is to make patients more independent, able to manage their psychiatric conditions, develop daily self-care and problem-solving skills and eventually be discharged to less restrictive settings with less intense treatment.

Will Spaulding, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln psychologist, said psychiatric rehabilitation is recognized as the most effective approach for patients who are highly impaired, unstable and high risk.

The Regional Center program has operated for years in collaboration with the UNL Department of Psychology.

Until a couple of years ago, the program served about 40 people. The unit, in Lincoln Regional Center's Building 14, was downsized to 17 beds after remodeling.

Families say they have

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been unable to get complete answers about what will happen to their loved ones as the program shuts down.

Scot Adams, director of the Nebraska Health and Human Services Department's division of behavioral health, said the decision is consistent with mental health reform, instituted in 2004, that strives to serve people in their communities.

There are increasing demands on the Lincoln Regional Center for treatment of sex offenders and mentally ill people who have committed crimes, he said. The center needs to respond rapidly to people whose mental illness is too complex and who are too aggressive to be in the community.

People at the Regional Center either come through the courts or through commitment by a mental health board.

It shouldn't take years to get out, he said. People should be there a relatively brief time and move to community care.

He understands the families' concerns, he said, but is trying to reassure them "nobody will be dismissed (into the community) until they

are ready to move on in life."

Of the 17 participants, one person graduated from the program on Tuesday and another will graduate this week, both moving into community programs.

The remaining 15 will move to one of two other buildings: the women's unit or one for men. They will have a full range of hospital resources in psychology, social work, occupational and recreational therapy, nursing and psychiatry, he said.

"We do not anticipate moving anyone into the forensic unit (for mentally ill people who have committed crimes)," he said.

When the participants move out of the Community Transition Program, it will be used for sex offenders, about 60 of whom are at the Regional Center, in the second and third phases of treatment, he said.

No full-time employees will lose their jobs because of the closure, which is expected to be complete by June 30, Adams said. But some reduction in expenses is expected. For one thing, the contract with UNL will be reduced, he said.

Family members want more details about how treatment will change.

"What is the evidence that it will be better than the

very successful program they have now?" Taber said. "We have been so grateful for the program. It has served an enormous and critical gap in the mental health spectrum."

For some of the participants, there are no alternatives in the community, she said.

For Geier, the program's treatment of her son has been a relief. He has been treated for 20 years for paranoid schizophrenia and is responding for the first time, she said.

Moving the patients out is treating them like cattle, she said.

"It's despicable."

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Powerball: **19**

Power Play: **3**

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2, 18, 25, 32, 36

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Nebraska 2 by 2 (March 31)

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